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ABSTRACT

The Teacher Plus Program (TPP) currently used in the Frederick County (Maryland) Public Schools shares some characteristics with a system for rewarding excellence in teachers that was originally proposed by Myron Lieberman and has since been championed by Albert Shanker. Lieberman's proposal called for the creation of national educational specialty boards capable of certifying teachers in areas of specialization. These teachers would then be entitled to additional compensation. In the absence of such national boards, the Frederick County schools established local boards of exemplary teachers and administrators to consider providing incentive awards to local, self-nominated teachers. TPP supplements the district's existing three-step career system by offering teachers on 9-month contracts the opportunity to receive awards paying for 10 days' involvement in professional growth activities outside the regular contract. The teachers are also asked to take leadership roles in the schools in their professional areas. School systems considering implementing such a program should check the provisions of their negotiated agreements, their salary policies, and their transfer policies; they should also be prepared for challenges from their local teacher associations. (PGD)

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Volume 17/Number 2/February 1986

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It's time to recognize excellent teachers

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It's time to recognize excellent teachers

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Special recognition for specialized skills certainly is not a unique concept. The medical profession, as just one example, has been doing it for years; board certification is a mark of honor for a physician.

Nor is the concept of additional compensation for work over and above the norm particularly extraordinary. What business doesn't have its bonus system in one form or another?

But present these concepts in the context of education, especially under the aegis of "merit pay," and, as American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Albert Shanker noted recently in *The New York Times*, it's like waving a red flag in front of a bull.

Quality teachers needed

As the public continues to demand more and more accountability from its public schools, merit pay in some form probably will have to be factored in by school systems. Teaching must be made more attractive and lucrative so that those already in the profession can be convinced to stay and top quality students will be encouraged to pursue teaching careers.

Although education traditionally has been recognized as vital to American society, the perceived status of the teaching profession has fallen to a dangerously low level. Women, once attracted to education because it was one of few areas that offered professional career opportunities, have more lucrative and challenging options today. And, while recent reports have had the positive effect of focusing national attention on education, they also have had the negative effect of pointing an accusing finger at educators, sometimes on the basis of insufficient information. Public perception of and respect for teachers must be enhanced if more and better qualified young people are to consider education as a meaningful professional career.

Increasing salaries across the board will contribute to this goal. But only a system of rewarding excellence will attract the very best. It also is the only feasible economic alternative. Despite opposition to merit pay from teacher unions that fear it will arouse unhealthy competition and destroy collegiality and cooperation, merit pay is a key requisite to enhancing the teaching profession.

Underpaid and undermotivated

American teachers are underpaid. That's a major reason for the difficulty school systems are experiencing in recruiting high quality graduates. Compounding this problem is the incentive to lethargy within school systems that stems from the absence of monetary incentives for growth and improvement. Teachers who do an outstanding job may receive outstanding evaluations, but they also receive the same salary as their less-than-outstanding colleagues. Whether we like it or not, salary and status are closely interrelated.

The AFT's Shanker suggests eliminating the loaded term "merit pay" and considering a proposal first made by Myron Lieberman in 1959 and renewed by him in the October 1985 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*. Lieberman proposes that the teaching profession develop the mechanisms for identifying outstanding teachers in the same way that other professions, such as medicine, distinguish the general practitioner from the specialist who has taken advanced training and undergone rigorous examinations.

Lieberman suggests national educational specialty boards to establish criteria for certifying teachers in particular specialties, such as in French, English, or in math. "Board-certified" teachers would be entitled to additional compensation. There might even be intermediate certification for those deemed "board-eligible"—those who hold some specialty board qualifications.

Analogous local program

In the 1984-85 school year, the Frederick County (Md.) school system (K-12, 24,000 students) instituted its Teacher Plus Program (TPP), a local-level incentive program that is somewhat analogous to Lieberman's board-eligibility concept. TPP is based on *local* performance and *local* criteria. The plan attempts to accomplish two goals:

- to reward performance;
- to acknowledge and use teacher expertise.

TPP corresponds to Lieberman's proposal by eliminating the issues of favoritism in the selection process and competition among teachers. Lieberman would do the former by having a national board of the profession certify teachers instead of local administrators; TPP eliminates administrative favoritism by using teachers to select the Plus Teachers. Both plans eliminate competition among teachers by using a self-nomination plan.

But TPP should be even more acceptable to local school boards than Lieberman's proposal because it is a prototype of a locally developed plan; it is consistent with the tradition of local control of education.

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Stuart D. Berger is superintendent of Frederick County (Md.) Public Schools and will be a key participant in a "Share the Success" clinic at the NSBA convention in Las Vegas, March 5-8, which will provide even more information about Frederick's Teacher Plus Plan.

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Program development

TPP grew out of the efforts of a school board advisory committee that met during the 1983-84 school year to discuss the concepts of merit pay and master teacher. The impetus to establish the committee, which consisted of citizens, teachers, administrators, and representatives of the Frederick County Teachers Association, came from then board president Rita Gordan who felt there should be some way of rewarding good teachers.

The advisory committee rejected merit pay and master teacher concepts in the forms found at that time in school systems across the country. They were found to be politically volatile. Instead, the committee recommended a different type of plan for teacher incentives and rewards and a series of concepts upon which to base the plan.

Supplements salary schedule

In reporting to the board, the committee stated that it is essential that "incentives and rewards for teaching performance are provided in addition to the regular salary schedule." The board accepted the committee's report and asked staff to develop a specific program based on the committee's recommendations.

The plan is called the Teacher Plus Plan because it *supplements* the existing three-step career system that is based on years of experience and academic credentials (bachelor's degree and/or certificate, master's degree, and master's degree plus 30 hours) with no allowance for performance quality. TPP recognizes that excellence in teaching is demonstrated in a variety of ways; that there are multiple needs and opportunities within the school system that could be met through additional service by teachers; and that the appeal of particular rewards and incentives varies among individual teachers.

With TPP the school board rewards teachers for activities that many teachers undertook without pay in the past. The teachers who spend their own time honing their skills, upgrading their knowledge, seeking new and challenging ways to present the curriculum to students, working with students after hours are legion—from the teacher who spends evenings working with students on science fair projects to the teacher who spends a summer developing computer software designed uniquely for his or her classroom. TPP is Frederick County's way of telling these teachers that we recongize what they do and encourage them to continue.

Process

Applications are by self-nomination, thereby eliminating the possibility that an eligible teacher would be overlooked because someone else did not nominate the teacher. TPP is paid for from discretionary funds (approximately $100,000 this year and estimated at $175,000 next year), not from funds that normally go toward salary increases for all staff.

In brief, here's how TPP works:

- Eligible teachers (full-time, tenured teachers not working on 12-month contracts) may apply by filling out an application, providing references, and answering two essay questions.
- Plus teachers are chosen by a selection committee consisting of seven teachers (exemplary teachers who aren't eligible for TPP because they are on 12-month contracts) and three administrators, thus enabling teachers to select their own colleagues for awards.
- Those selected are awarded ten days of per diem pay (on average, $1,250) to do anything that constitutes professional growth—from the more traditional activities such as attending professional meetings to such esoteric possibilities as an English teacher reading great literature or an art teacher visiting museums.
- The ten days cannot fall on regularly scheduled class days; rather, they can be Saturdays, Sundays, holidays, or during summer.
- A formula has been established, based on school enrollment, so that each individual school can have only so many Plus teachers per year. This ensures that the progam is spread equitably throughout the school system.
- Plus teachers are expected to work with fellow teachers, administrators, supervisors, and others to develop personal leadership skills.
- Employees selected as Plus Teachers serve in that capacity for three years. If they wish reassignment for an additional three-year term, they must reapply.

In the program's first year, 180 teachers applied for awards and 150 qualified (based on the references, essay, and application). Although awards were offered to 117 teachers, some didn't accept because they would have to transfer to another school to adhere to the school enrollment formula. Those who didn't accept are eligible automatically the next year.

Our target was to have one Plus Teacher for each school with up to 249 students enrolled, two for schools with enrollments of 250 to 499 students, and up to six Plus Teachers for schools with more than 1,250 students. The number of awards will be increased by 50 during fiscal year 1987 and by yet another 50 the following year. By the third year of the program, we anticipate that more than 200 teachers will have received awards; approximately 1,000 of Frederick's 1,400-member teaching staff are eligible.

TPP provides Plus Teachers with professional development opportunities that are self-directed and system-approved. TPP assumes that improvement of the individual implies improvement of the system: completion of a specific plan of professional development activities will result in improved skills and increased knowledge and, therefore, in improved educational opportunities and benefits for our students. An evaluation component is being developed to measure the effects of TPP on teachers and students.

Leadership encouraged

In addition to the ten days of per diem

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employment, Plus Teachers assigned to the high schools and middle schools have one period per day—in addition to the teacher's regular planning period—devoted to an assignment that recognizes the professinoal competence of the teacher: personal leadership time. Among the personal leadership activities in which Plus Teachers are involved this year are:

- compiling a handbook and conducting inservice on classroom management techniques;
- helping to foster a "love of reading" program by acting as a resource person;
- working with students to prepare an entry in the 1986 Frederick County Film Festival;
- previewing and selecting computer software to meet the needs of the language arts program;
- serving as a resource support for new teachers;
- extending the interdisciplinary teaching concept between special education classes and regular mainstream classes;
- developing teaching strategies for students in remedial level classes.

Clearly, the diversity of activities taking place during personal leadership time is a measure of the diversity of interests and experience found among Plus Teachers.

Policy considerations

To implement the Teacher Plus Plan in your school system, several policy areas should be addressed.

First, your negotiated agreement must be reviewed. Unless you intend to negotiate your incentive plan, you must develop ideas that don't violate the conditions of your agreement. Remember, your agreement also is board policy; it cannot be changed unilaterally. Making your plan compatible with the agreement is the most important and trickiest aspect of any incentive plan.

Also, check to see if your salary policies contain philosophical statements regarding equal compensation. Read them carefully; total pay for all teachers at the same step may not be the same under a reward system. Further, consult your policies to determine method of payment. Must all payments be divided equally or can the incentive payment be made in one lump sum? Will the most effective method of payment require a policy change?

Finally, will your transfer policy have to be changed in order to implement the incentive program equitably throughout the school system? Although involuntary transfers could hurt the plan, some plans may require that practice. Even voluntary transfer policies, however, may need revisions, especially when eligibility is based solely on seniority.

Creativity flourishes under TPP

Many of the activities Plus Teachers have chosen for their ten per diem days have been particularly creative. They include:

- meeting with several new teachers to review time and efficiency techniques and long- and short-range planning skills;
- making manipulatives for transitional first graders;
- writing learning packets and lesson plans for teaching research skills to middle school students;
- researching career education programs for the handicapped;
- developing professional readings in the field of guidance (for example, *The Kids Book of Divorce*, *You Are Somebody Special*, and *How to Teach Children Responsibility*);
- reading social studies curriculum guides to prepare music materials to correlate;
- developing a slide series on the National Zoo, Baltimore Acquarium, and Longwood Gardens;
- photographing marine life under water in Key Largo, Fla.;
- visiting the Bitburg Cemetary, Dachau concentration camp, and the Berlin Wall, as well as sites in Switzerland, Italy, and Paris;
- studying Italian at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

Pride and pitfalls

Implementation of TPP has been nearly perfect. Not one teacher has questioned the process or its results. The plan has wide acceptance and support within the community. Numerous school systems have requested information about it.

Nevertheless, two problems have developed. Both involve the local teachers association.

In the first instance, the association requested a list of the teachers who were chosen. The administration resisted this request for two reasons: (1) it would be a violation of individual teacher's privacy and (2) publication of the list was antithetical to the program in that a list implied that these were the 117 best teachers in the system rather than 117 teachers who were examples of the excellent teachers in the system. Ultimately, it was found that state law required that we provide the names.

The second snag resulted from the union's decision to file a grievance. Although the association challenged the plan as violative of several clauses in the negotiated agreement, the essential complaint was that the plan itself had to be negotiated. While the union leadership stressed that it was not opposed to the plan, it nevertheless had to be negotiated. We had anticipated this problem by developing a plan that could withstand such challenge; all components of the plan clearly were within the ambit of past practice.

Although the grievance has not yet been decided, we are confident and are continuing to prepare for next year's program. Discussions with teachers indicate that there will be even greater participation now that teachers see that TPP works.

Program benefits

The Teacher Plus Plan is an appropriate step in implementing Frederick County's five-year educational plan that was approved by the school board in October, 1984. The long-range plan aims at developing and implementing a program to recognize the achievements of employees, to reward excellence in performance, and to provide incentives to strive toward increased productivity.

Philosophically, the advisory committee determined that excellence is both an ideal and a range: teachers should be encouraged to work toward the ideal and within the range of excellence. The endeavors of all teachers to attain degrees of excellence must be recognized and rewarded. The board was cautioned not to establish a system of incentives that would reward only an elite few while discouraging advancement for most. For Frederick County schools, TPP, with its open-ended approach to professional improvement, addresses that philosophy appropriately.

In our view, every school system should have some plan to reward good teaching in a tangible way. Opportunities to grow, lead, and earn are essential if teaching is to be a true profession. ■